

## IMAGELESS BEAUTY

## AN INQUIRY INTO THE PROSODY OF MEANINGS

BY HELEN HUSS PARKHURST

SOMETIMES, when exasperated by a moralistic tone in literary criticism, or again when freshly and powerfully wrought upon by sheer color, cadence, shape or sound, one may be goaded to the pronouncement that the beauty of true art resides in its sensuous appeal alone. In such mood one is ready to argue that a masterpiece does not gain but rather loses by wealth of suggestiveness and derived significance; that its essence is an immediate seduction of the eye or the ear undistracted by the devious operations of the mind; in a word, that the more purified of articulate meaning it becomes the higher it must rank esthetically. In corroboration of this extreme view one may instance patterns of rare beauty which represent nothing, teach nothing; and the many triumphs of design or color whose meanings are first and last formal meanings—abstract values of line and tone and mass. Still more of a corroboration is music, in its immediacy, its disregard of the natural world, its magic of directly communicated tone and harmony and rhythm. Only in literature do we seem to encounter the first serious obstacles to the theory. Before the paradox that non-sense verses at their most perfect ought to be more than a match for all other forms of poetry we are brought to a halt. To the irrationality of one's completely pagan moments even this paradox might appear defensible, but in cooler mood there is no other way than to reconsider one's original contention regarding the esthetic irrelevance of ideas.

At most times, certainly, it is perfectly clear that the creation of the sculptor is something more than abstract patterns cut in a solid substance, the creation of the painter more than colored arabesques, and the creation of the poet far and away more than the contrivance of melodious sound. Everywhere the visible and the audible em-

bodies meanings transcending the particular throb and pulse of the moment. And yet in no case is the expressed meaning clearly independent of the manner of its expression. In a great poem the language is not entirely one thing and the thought entirely another. The thought would not be precisely the same thought were it otherwise clothed; and the music of the verse would be altered if other meanings were grafted upon it.

But if a great work of art is a fusion of form and meaning—a fusion so perfect that complete isolation of the two elements is impossible,—it still does not follow that the study of them as in some sense independent variables is precluded. That at least the form may be treated of independently of its ideational content there is nobody who denies. We find no lack of works devoted to the manipulation of color, of line, of rhyme and rhythm, of balance, symmetry and the rest,—all without reference to subject-matter. If there can be a technique of form, why not of ideas? May there not indeed already exist a *prosody of meanings*, neglected in theory but rigidly adhered to in practice—a set of principles for the choice and combination of ideas, principles as definite and severe as are the principles of dramatic form, of visual design or of musical harmony?

The immediate denial of such a possibility may appear to lie in the lack of distinctiveness of the subject-matter of art. There appears to be no sort of theme over which the artist possesses a monopoly, and nothing in life or out of it which he may not legitimately appropriate. Starlight and nightingales, madness and love and death enter as properly into the formulae of statistics as into the substance of an elegy. And matters as mundane as poverty, as unlovely as vice, as simple and common as drought and harvest and human toil belong no less to dramatist and painter than to sociologist and economist. The catholicity and democracy of beauty renders abortive any attempt to get at its essence by any process of exclusion.

Nor does a more formalistic inquiry in terms of the concept of organicity promise better success. Though it is certainly true that a work of art is composed of parts whose meaning largely lies in their relation to the meaning of the whole, the same is equally true of everything possessed of any kind of unity—of living creatures and manufactured machines and logical dissertations no less than of a statue or a symphony or a lyric. Moreover, only a desperate straining of the notion of organicity could force it to account for the beauty of parts in their character of independent units—the quite intrinsic loveliness of the single epithet or metaphor which is

the product of no extraneous relation to the larger whole. It well may be that organic unity wherever manifest is the source of esthetic significance. But in that case what we wish to investigate is not the elements of beauty common to beasts and planets and sonnets and mathematical demonstrations by virtue of a mutual dependence in them all of part and whole. We must return to our starting point and seek in some other direction for an answer to our question as to the composition of that imageless beauty—beauty of meaning or idea—which is the inalienable and peculiar attribute of the work of the creative imagination. If neither subject matter as such nor that interdependence of part and whole which we call organicity appears to promise the distinction we are in search of, is it perhaps by some unusual juxtaposition of the ideas it expresses a kind of invisible design—that art differs from all else? Let us approach this possibility by way of a brief consideration of the nature of scientific thought on the one hand, and on the other, the nature of the raw materials of life.

Formal logic teaches that all propositions, regardless of subject matter, fall into two groups: that they are reducible either to statements of the inclusion of classes—assertions of relation; or to statements of the exclusion of classes—denial of relation. Now it is plain that these two types, or positive and negative propositions, are of many degrees, the positive ranging all the way from statements as to the coincidence of single attributes to affirmations of complete identity; the negative, from separations based on a single difference to absolute antitheses. The preponderance of men's ordinary observations is of course in the way of something short of either extreme. One may even question whether the conditions for an assertion of total coincidence of qualities is ever given in nature; and whether cases of genuine antithesis are ever encountered. For whereas the world exhibits a variety and richness that is adverse to the discovery of repetitions; it is no less maladapted to the delimiting of sharply defined opposites. Nature, as we get it in our warm living human experience, appears to be a thing of subtle modulations, continuously different from part to part and yet wrought of interpenetrations. Day passes into night, youth into maturity, sound into silence, through a series of indistinguishable stages. Nowhere, unless it be in works of abstract metaphysics or in such cold storage versions of reality as we sometimes get through science, do we meet with unconditional identifications, or unambiguous and violent contrastings.

In philosophy, in science, in all places where schematic representations are acceptable substitutes for the multitudinous world of concrete experience, these unconditional identifications and violent contrastings are unquestionably to be met with. That, precisely for those to whom the variegated things of sense are more significant than their unearthly schemata, and more real is the ground for quarrel with the rationalizer. To such persons, the realm of the vital and conscious is to the regions where hard antitheses and unqualified generalizations obtain as the earth with its suffused light,—brightness passing always by gradual degrees into shadow—is to cold lunar places where to move out of sunshine is to plunge without transition into profundities of blackness. The moon is dead, and all things like the moon which fail to show blendings of opposites, minglings of dark and light, are dead likewise and alien to the nature of what is human. The universalizings of the logician, the uncompromising distinctions of the physical scientist, are alike inadequate to life which manifests everywhere variety within unity and unity within variety.

Those who argue thus against the somewhat rigid and often unimaginative operations of the lover of abstractions, will turn with relief to the labors of the artist. There, they declare, is to be found what they crave: an amplitude of vision which somehow, without dissociating them, renders things still more rich and individualized than they are in nature.

Turning then to the arts in the expectation of discovering in them a total abstaining from the practices that devitalize speculative thought, we are frankly startled to find at the very first encounter that instead of less extravagance with the violently antithetical we have here actually more. Not merely is the artist preoccupied with what is individual, not only does he dwell upon the variousness of things, but he flies to the extreme of insisting upon maximum oppositeness. The impression conveyed is that if it is the rationalizing intellect that originates concepts and forges antitheses, it is the artistic imagination that revels in them. What science of matter ever dwelt upon the antithesis of support and burden with the ingenuity and elaboration with which it is treated graphically in the masterpieces of architecture? What theory of mechanics ever set forth the antithetical notions of heavy and light, upward and downward, balance and unbalance with the insistence with which it is set forth in a statue, or a painting? What writer of sociological treatises ever exploited the opposition of youth and age, poverty and

riches, greatness and obscurity, success and defeat, as have the composers of the great comedies and tragedies of the world's literature? What mere theorist whatsoever in the entire history of abstract thought ever contrived to ring the changes that the poets have rung upon the contrast of bitter and sweet, visible and invisible, dawn and evening, life and death, sleep and waking? In the course of their lucubrations the masters of speculation have plotted bold demarcations and set up impassable barriers, but by some strange freak of fancy it is the great imaginers who have fully appropriated the vivid and irreconcilable oppositions to make of them the very body and substance of their art.

From one point of view such an outcome was most emphatically to have been anticipated—and this in spite of the queer alliance between the artist and the theorizer which thereby results. The first law of sensory form in art is the law of rhythm; and because of the closeness of fusion of form and meaning we might suppose that laws of the one would prove to be also laws of the other. But if the principle of rhythm is the first principle of aesthetic meanings, what could the artist look to for its completer realization than to antitheses? Such pairs of notions as rest and motion, bounded and boundless, dawn and evening, living and lifeless, speech and silence, constitute a true rhythmic unit, causing a pendulum swing of thought in wide sweeping alternations. Indeed, it was not astonishing, but quite to be anticipated, that out of the riches of ideas—all of them free to his choice—it was groupings of incompatibles, of notions violently disrupted, fraught with conflict, that the poet or the painter would seize upon.

But if on the one hand life is never a thing of sharply silhouetted contrasts, never a matter of logical antitheses; and if on the other hand art no less than abstract thought and all the sciences which are its product feeds upon radical distinctions and divisions, how reconcile life and art in the first place; and how in the second place distinguish art and logic?

When the abstract thinker disjoins two things he treats them as completely diverse, even though the ground for the disjunction is an unimportant and contingent unlikeness. Similarly, when he, perhaps at the next moment, conjoins them, it is with the finality of an indissoluble union. Relations of similarity and difference between things are thus atomized; no aroma of one kind of relation leaks out to qualify the other, no tingeings, no blendings, no alternating reberations occur. A cinematographic version of relations



of likeness and unlikeness is what we are given, though in the actual objects of the world these are simultaneously present, inextricably tangled together. Now though we find that art and abstract thought make common use of this principle of contrast, it still remains true that the one is alien to life, the other closely approximates to it. In other words, whatever may be the raw stuff in the way of contrasted ideas that the artist works with, the outcome of his labor is by no means a patchwork of juxtaposed concepts, but in some strange way a reinstatement of the fulness and continuity of living experience. Within the rich texture of the finished product we find no blurring of the antitheses originally chosen. What we do find, however, superimposed upon the contrasts, are their intricate combinations and interpenetrations. Filtered through the deeper understanding of the artist, as filtered through his more delicately responsive senses of sight and touch and hearing, not only has the variety within the unity of the world—its individualities and uniquenesses—been enhanced; but also its unity within variety. Instead of a cinematographic version of the alternating pain and pleasure, truth and error, strength and weakness, dream and reality, which make up the content of experience, the artist contrives to reveal the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing reality of aspects of the one kind amid aspects of the other. It is this sensitive blending of opposites along with their disjoining that gives to the artist's treatment of them an extreme dissimilarity from the treatment by the logician, and also a startling adequacy to the content of immediate experience.

There is a dynamic quality and a cumulative significance injected into both terms of an antithesis when their reciprocal interactions are accentuated. The conflict between youth and age, nobility and baseness, fidelity and infidelity, illusion and disillusion, would lack a large degree of its power and pathos—quite apart from its verisimilitude—did the artist not succeed in so vivifying the opposed concepts as to reveal the reflections and anticipations of each in the other. Youth and age are antagonistic, but there are retrospective relics of youth in antiquity, and confused foreshadowings of age even in youth. Nobility and baseness, fidelity and infidelity are alien, but only in the bodiless abstractions of the philosopher are they merely alien. In the behavior of man, in the creations of the dramatist, pitifully and grandly each has roots in the other, each sends out a stream of influence providing a continuous pathway through diminishing degrees of itself into its irreconcilable opposite.

A denial of antithesis in the very midst of an insistence upon it, the asseveration of difference in the same breath with pronouncement of unimpeachable union—by such devices does the artist contrive to fashion a world more real than the real world itself.

In the spacial and temporal arts alike it is first of all the meaning of the work as a whole which is to be accounted for in terms of the double process we have been considering. Take any great animal carving, a superb tiger, or a horse or an eagle. What are the antithetical ideas which are at once opposed and reconciled? Well, for one thing very probably the contrasted concepts of brute and human. There was a bronze peacock produced not long ago which very certainly incorporated this particular antithesis: a slight enlargement on the head very subtly suggesting the golden crown of a human monarch. Irony was there, and pathos, too. The mere animal exalted by its assimilation to far-off kingship, that kingship in turn reduced to vanity by the reciprocal action of the implied analogy. Again, in probably every convincing tiger cut in stone there is contained both power and powerlessness, both an almost unearthly potential swiftness and a thwarting by the ponderousness of the solid substance of which after all it is composed. Is it objected that to the discerning eye and mind the living model likewise, and not merely its counterfeit presentment, must have contained the same opposed and reconciled contradictions? So be it. Not to be diverted into an entirely irrelevant issue, let us for the time agree with Croce and affirm that to the extent that any consciousness contains even momentarily an apprehension of which the completed statue is a reproduction there is a work of art. Our concern is with the nature of the creative apprehension, whether incarnated in stone or departing like a dream in the night. The point is that antitheses are sharply envisaged and at the same time welded in an indissoluble synthesis. It is as if the artist played fast and loose first with life and then with logic. As though he meant to go all the way with the abstractionist as against immediate experience, he rips from their context the most extreme of antithetical concepts, only by some wizardry to make them come alive again—the abstractionist being in the meantime left in the lurch in his turn.

Take another instance of the total meaning of a work of art. There is nothing which better bears out the foregoing contentions than the case of portraits. The outstanding peculiarity of any notable portrait is that it conveys at one and the same time the essence of humanity as such and the highly specialized nature of the chosen

subject. Universal and particular ; abstract and concrete ; the neither man nor woman, young nor old, rich nor poor, and over against that a person most carefully dated and placed, with individualized nature, particular temperament, social status, and inalienable visible aspect. No great portrait but presents this paradox, sets up this rhythmic alternation of attention to the many and the one, the humanity which is set over against the single member of it, and that member as in the last analysis typifying humanity. This is of course to make no guess as to the means by which the artist accomplishes the trick. Some process of selection it must be, a combined elimination, exaggeration, subordination, but that is to explain it not at all. Enough that for the spectator the single set of lineaments, grave or gay, haughty or humble, ugly or beautiful, which is the outward guise of this one personality sets the imagination ranging to all other personalities, all other fates, all the tragedy and comedy which the life of man contains. The one face the symbol of all humanity ; then the symbol of all manhood or all womanhood as the case may be ; then of poverty as against riches ; of guilelessness as against the treachery of the world. The whole epitome of life is there, even while expression, attitude, mood has been particularized to the point of being a selection of a transient event that never before happened and will not be repeated throughout all eternity.

But it is not merely of the ideas of larger range forming the basis of the work of art as a whole that the double principle we have been discussing obtains. In the arts of time, at least, the alternating disjoinings and conjoinings, departures and approaches, of contrasted notions may be carried out even to the detail of a metaphor or an epithet. What is it indeed for a phrase or a name to be imaginative but to contain within it room for the antipodal swing of thought, delicately brushing its wings against things widely sundered only to unite into a single image their unacquainted reflections ? Wheel within wheel, minor situations in a drama no less than the major, secondary themes no less than the main theme, may be shown to depend upon the same principle. Once more we venture no pronouncement as to how the thing is done. All we can do is to note that just as branch and twig and leaf copy the contour of the whole tree, so the invisible pattern of meanings comprehended by a work of art is re-echoed throughout even to the uttermost detail.

We have seen how the law of rhythm operates in a work of art for the control both of sensory form and ideational content, and how antithesis furnishes to thought the analogue of visual sym-



metry, audible rhythm, rhyme and the rest. But there is a second law of scarcely less significance than the first for the achievement of finished perfection—the law of the unrhythmic.

Rhythm and the unrhythmic: through the one allied with all cyclic phenomena, rendered law-abiding, orderly; through the other differentiated from everything that is mechanical, made free and freshly creative like life itself—such is the spectacle that melodious verse or the exquisitely balanced design of a pictured landscape, or the structure of a cathedral or a symphony presents. In the temporal arts, blended symmetry and a-symmetry of formal structure—masses, curves, colors, figures, echoing and re-echoing but generating always new and unanticipated departures from the norm of the invariable; in the temporal arts, the regular qualified everywhere by the irregular—variation of beat, of interval, of rhyme, of harmony, breaking constantly in upon uniformities, and creating an ascending hierarchy of modulations. Order and disorder, the predictable and the unpredictable, to this does art, so far as sensory form is concerned, reduce. What refinements then of this same element of lawlessness qualifying the rhythm of antithesis may we look for among ideas?

In their handling by the artist those antitheses are modified, as we have seen, such modification amounting to a kind of irregularity by reason of the constant checking of the process of direct antithesis. But more properly it may perhaps be called a super-rhythm producing a sequence of pulses of constantly diminishing amplitude, thus forming a spiral path for the movement of the mind through an ascending series of relations. It has become clear how important this hierarchy of super-rhythms is for the creation of that continuity and many-dimensional character which is missed by logic and is characteristic of life. But even a many-dimensional rhythm retains certain undesirable features of the artificial and the ready-made. If the ideas communicated by art were formed of such stuff only it would seem as if they could quite easily be counterfeited by a logical machine or sufficient complexity. There is, however, in the ideational content of art another and more genuine unrhythmic, present in a degree varying with the classical or romantic proclivities of the artist—an element of wildness which is the true counterpart of the a-symmetries, the inversions, the discords and the imperfect rhymes.

Antithesis as employed in art—vivid and abrupt though it be—is seldom if ever between the directly antithetical. It is ever, so to

speak, a red faintly tinged with yellow that is contrasted with green. In some measure this kind of a-symmetry might seem to be an unavoidable consequence of the circumstance that contrasts, howsoever clean-cut and logically perfect, would always, insofar as they were given concrete realization, be imbedded in material which in some respects at least failed to yield yet further contrasts. Youth and age even of the extremest degrees would, as incorporated in particular personages acquire a certain a-symmetry by reason of additional details of each which found no antithetical echo in the other—not even a slightly distorted echo. Yet, despite the solidity of greatly conceived characters, and the substantial texture of finely imagined cause and effect sequences, there is far less of concrete filling introduced into art sheerly for the sake of concreteness than might be anticipated. Twinges of aesthetic conscience would act as a brake to the accumulation of details which did not somehow directly contribute formally aesthetic value—in other words, supply a definite rhythm of meaning or definite departure therefrom. The distinctive matter about art is that it is never haphazard, never constrained by necessities or limitations which it does not consciously accept, and then exploit, and so make a virtue of. There are no subsidiary details which, devoid of rhythmic value, function merely accidentally and unintentionally to blur sharp conflicts, deaden overtones, and introduce generally that muddying effect which the irrelevancies of actual life contribute. Whatever departures from regular rhythms the artist indulges in he indulges in deliberately—even though not perhaps as a result of any rigid process of intellectual reasoning.

The wildness then—that unpredictable element of variation by which the breath of life is breathed into the stark logical figures of mere antithesis—might be expected to break out into new rhythms at a higher level like more faintly sounding overtones, these in turn to be modified by still further irregularities and the whole process to be repeated. This indeed is precisely what occurs. Between the increments of variation which serve to rescue an otherwise dead antithesis, there each time flowers a new, less immediate relation of opposition, which in turn must be saved by a still further increment of the unexpected, and so on forever. It is thus truly an unending process, subtly intertwined with that other process constituting the super-rhythmic, which is initiated by the artist. Its unendingness is what makes the irreducible qualitative difference between all art and the static schemata of logic. Its unendingness

is what assures to the questing imagination a never-to-be completed pathway to travel upon.

And now finally it is time to consider how the many rhythms of contrast yielded by the processes of the natural world and by human experience are subordinate to another single antithesis of more constant and universal import upon which those lesser alternations rest like flutings upon an arch, rhythmic within larger symmetries; or like ripples of sound that stir the ampler swell of a great cadence. In the midst of the rapture of all that is beautiful there is an element of sadness which makes the deep experience of any supreme art something akin to tears. It is as if art had as its unchanging theme a heart-breaking finitude and transiency, even if perhaps always projected upon a shadowy background of the infinite. Or better, as if it were forever groping after the imperishable and flawless but tainted with the canker of death and imperfection. Certain it is that a breath from the world of disillusion seems to chill the warmth of even the most triumphant beauty, shriveling its petals a little as with a blight. Does the fault lie with us who come to art with spirits that soon soon falter and drop back to the mists and doubts of mundane existence? Or is it rather that the blemish of mortality lies at the heart of beauty itself, as it seems to do? Is the song of death always really there, its grim melody undrowned out by the crashing chords of life? Does the dim image of defeat, the premonition of broken hopes really darken the landscape which should hold nothing but sunshine and flowers?

To meet any such question there is one fact that should be taken account of. The art we are concerned with is human art, conformed to human needs, cognizant of human idiosyncracies, subject to human limitations. Whatever the art of an angel might do, the art of man can not transcend altogether the conditions of his earthly sojourning. It cannot, and perhaps it would not. No healthy person, it has been said, can dwell in thought upon his own dissolution. But dissolution is after all his ultimate destiny; and since the omens of it beset his daily path it is only to be expected that even if he successfully excludes it from his waking thoughts, apprehensions of it should arise in dreams of sleep and in those other dreams which he calls art. Even in man's living experience as it passes, it is the constant presence of an incompletely envisaged limitation—of his precarious hold upon life and the necessary frustration of all ultimate strivings, that gives to his dream their mood of cosmic grandeur, to his loves and passions, encompassed by partings and

the threat of partings, their sharp beauty and pathos. What is utterly secure beyond chance of doubting, what carries the promise of continuance without possibility of end, is, because undiscoverable, in a degree unmeaningful, and so deprived of full emotional significance. The human artist, bound by inexorable necessities, draws profit from the very bonds that hold him. He chooses as the underlying rhythm of all his creation the supreme antithesis of deathlessness and death.

A race of beings subject to no fear of terminations, undying and never weary nor defeated, would fashion an art on different laws, with its content and its entire intention different. It might be good to be such a being, and attain to a large leisurely bliss unmenaced by disaster. But so long as we retain our humanhood it is likely that the rhythm of our emotions will remain as it is, and that we shall alternately sip from the cup of fear and hope, of misery and gladness. So long at least as we do, the things which will yield most genuine and profound delight will be those things in which are united intimations of felicity and of regret. It will be the frail things, the tender things, the vanishing things, which will elicit the keenest throb of appreciation and wonder: delicate flowers, cloud shadows, the beatific illusions of young love, the thrill before the dawn. What confers upon all such fragile and precious elements of the world their almost unearthly beauty is the antithesis and at the same time the miraculous blending of the real and the ideal, the must be and the might have been. But elsewhere than among the characteristic and limited themes of the lyric poet the same echoes of finitude may be heard. Indeed, there is no subject ever chosen by the artist which fails to start those echoes—which fails to set up the antiphonal chant of death and deathlessness with its ceaselessly ascending spirals of rhythmic and a-rhythmic modulations. For however picturesque or interesting or important the multitudinous other contrasts which the artist discovers for this art, this is the only contrast that is inescapable. It is the only one which can set its seal equally upon the solemn and the joyous, thrust itself alike into mourning and festivity, and find a place as well in the midst of the trivial as of the momentous. For the one fact common to the lot of all men, transcending the differences of wealth and poverty, blessedness and despair, is the fact of the merciless shadow of life's awful brevity, the fated frustration of its godlike dreams, and its goal in oblivion.